



# FINDING AURORA

REBECCA LANGHAM



A NineStar Press Publication  
Published by NineStar Press  
P.O. Box 91792,  
Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87199 USA.  
[www.ninestarpres.com](http://www.ninestarpres.com)

## Finding Aurora

Copyright © 2018 by Rebecca Langham  
Cover Art by Natasha Snow Copyright © 2018

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact NineStar Press at the physical or web addresses above or at [Contact@ninestarpres.com](mailto:Contact@ninestarpres.com).

Printed in the USA  
Second Edition  
December, 2018

eBook ISBN: 978-1-949909-67-8

# Finding Aurora

*Rebecca Langham*

# Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)  
[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[About the Author](#)

For my mum. She would have loved this story.

# Chapter One

I DOUBT THERE was even one person in Grimvein who hadn't heard the story of the sleeping princess. There were those who claimed she'd died a century ago and the curse was merely a story to maintain hope of her well-being. Amir and I knew better. Somewhere beneath the layers of magic and goddess-knew-how-many demonic guardians in Oldpass, Princess Aurora Rose slept. The problem was getting to her.

"Looks like the map was accurate." Amir tucked the frayed parchment inside his leather vest and then stepped closer to the colossal boulder in front of us. "This entry is well concealed. Most people would walk right by without realising."

I had to agree. We were deep within the forest to the east of Oldpass. The path we'd been following for over a week had disappeared hours earlier, replaced by mossy undergrowth and grasses. The sweet scent of drenched wisteria had been overpowering, though not as overpowering as the menacing darkness that seemed to swallow natural sounds one would expect to hear in such a place. No birds twittering. No dripping condensation. Not even so much as a rustling branch. If not for Amir's orienteering skill and the importance of our quest, I'd have turned back.

“Does it open the old-fashioned way, Highness?” I indicated the door with my chin. Embedded in the rock and camouflaged, the ingress was almost unnoticeable, but we could make out the bevelled edges.

I sensed no magic surrounding the rock formation, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t any. I might have been one of the strongest casters in the five kingdoms, but I was still mortal. There’s only so much one person confined by flesh can know. Or see. Or do.

Amir ran his hand through his shoulder-length black hair. His rather wonderful, lustrous, shoulder-length black hair.

“Let’s see.” He pressed both his palms against the smooth surface, bracing his feet against the leaf-covered ground. Something whirred deep inside the boulder and clicked as though a latch had been released. He stepped back as the rectangular slab skulked off to the side, like a sword disappearing into its sheath. “It appears the answer would be yes, it does open the old-fashioned way. Sort of.”

“I must admit, I had my doubts.”

“As did I,” he replied, scratching at the stubble on his chin. In all the years I’d been acquainted with the prince, he’d always been clean-shaven, and the rugged growth on his face, as charming as it looked, seemed to irritate him more and more. “It seems too convenient there could be an underground passage that would take us beneath the outer walls.” His hands held on to the rock as he leaned forward, peering inside. His soft leather boots gripped his defined calves as he did. “It’s quite dark in here. Do you have that magnificent bauble of yours?” He withdrew from the opening and turned to face me.

I gaped at him. "Prince Amir, the moonbeam stone is no mere bauble. And yes, of course I do. I'll let the honour of first entry be yours."

He bowed slightly, his hand over his heart. "Why, thank you, caster." He returned his attention to the opening. "In we go."

I followed him closely as we left the fresh air and crunching leaves of the forest behind. Inside, the darkness was thick and the air acrid. I slipped my moonbeam stone out of a pouch clipped to my belt. With a thought, I willed a soft yellow light to emanate from the stone.

"Oh no," I said. As though the enclosed room had heard me, the door behind us closed fast and hard.

"It seems we're trapped." Typical Amir. Always so calm. He walked around the room. "But surely there is a way from here into the tunnel. This must be a kind of annex." I admired the fact that no matter how hopeless or scared Amir might have felt, he was always able to focus on the task at hand, putting his feelings aside until a more appropriate time presented itself.

"Mmmhmm." I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing away the tension that had taken up residence there. I grabbed the small flask attached to my belt, just above my left hip. The water soothed my throat and afforded a distraction from the momentary sense of panic.

"Talia, I need your help over here," Amir said. His voice was steady, but the shade of his cheeks betrayed bubbling anxiety.

"Yes, Highness." I took one more sip of water from my flask, clipped it onto my leather belt, and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. By the goddess, that place was hot. I wondered if we

might have found the first level of the underworld rather than the subterranean passageway into Oldpass.

“That’s twice in as many minutes,” Amir said, gently elbowing me as I joined him. “I keep telling you to stop calling me that. We’ve been travelling together for over two weeks. The formalities are unnecessary by now, wouldn’t you agree?” He smiled, and I couldn’t help but smile back. As the Leading Caster of Grimvein, I’d been assigned to help Amir on a journey the public needed to believe he’d taken on his own. So far, my magical services had been of little use, aside from starting a few campfires when we were especially impatient to eat our evening meal.

“Yes, Highness.” I bit my lower lip. “Amir. Sorry, it’s a force of habit.”

“It’s all right. We have bigger things to worry about right now anyway.” Turning on the spot, Amir reexamined the challenging situation we were in, what with the apparent lack of an exit. He kicked at a stone. It hit the wall, the thud reverberating through the enclosed space.

“Truer words were never spoken.” The moonbeam stone glowed a little brighter, reacting to my concern. We really shouldn’t have both come inside when the door yielded. What kind of a fool doesn’t think to keep one person outside in case the door—the mysterious door hidden deep within a forest—was enchanted?

“How can I be of assistance?” I asked, raising the stone to see his face more clearly. The smooth, rounded rock had been with me for years. A gift from a dear friend who existed on the other side of the veil.

“Watch.” He indicated a second door, barely visible, much like the first had been. Amir tried to grip the handle, the edges, and the hinges, but his fingers kept slipping, as though every part of it was two-dimensional, a reflection of reality without substance. “See? I can’t get a grip.” Worry lines stretched across the dark skin of his forehead.

The closer we’d gotten to our neighbouring kingdom, the more attuned to his emotions I had become. One hand on his hip. The other on the back of his neck. Sure signs that Amir was frustrated he’d been unable to solve the problem himself. It wasn’t arrogance or pride that drove his frustration, but rather a fierce independence he seemed desperate to cultivate. I couldn’t blame him. Amir was a prince. Very little of what happened in his life was of his own design. Though he was kind-hearted and, of course, wished to help free Aurora from the sleeping curse that kept her trapped, he’d looked so unhappy when his parents had first given him the ultimatum.

*Rescue Aurora, marry her, and bring our kingdoms together, or no longer be a prince.*

I was yet to discover exactly why he’d displayed such trepidation, but whatever it was he’d been feeling the day he’d been given his mission, it had only grown stronger since.

I nodded as I considered the doorway.

“Do you think you might be able to open it? You know, the not-so-old-fashioned way?” he said, planting his hands on his hips.

“I’m not sure.” I stepped closer, handing him the moonbeam stone. I could keep its glow alive while he held it, though it took more effort than I liked to expend for something as simple as a light.

Then again, not being stuck in a damp, humid room with no ventilation and no obvious escape route was also preferable. Especially when we were there to save someone likely to take Amir away from me. Every step we took felt like another step closer to destiny. To finding myself. To being happy. Because I was with him.

If he found Aurora—if he married her as he was bound to do—it would all disappear.

*Get it together.* Focus on the problem. Focus on the magic. Find a way through. I closed my eyes and looked toward the door with my second sight. The distractions of the physical world made it difficult to see what was really there.

“What’s it like? When you look at the world that way?” Amir’s voice was hollow and deep at the same time, as though he were speaking to me from the other end of a long tunnel.

His words made it harder to clear my mind, but how could I deny him such a simple pleasure?

“It’s magnificent,” I replied. “The world appears to me in its true colours. Shades that are impossible to describe in our tongue.”

I smiled and concentrated on the door. There was nothing of note. The whole wall appeared uniform, consistent in texture, shade, and density. It was thicker than I’d realised. There was no way I could physically penetrate it, not without considerable help. The kind of help Amir was ill-equipped to provide.

“There’s no door there. Just a solid wall,” I said. “It’s an illusion. A sick joke left behind by the one who sealed the city.”

“To give hope to anyone who made it this far,” Amir said flatly. “A cruel joke, indeed.” His fear pulsed around the edges of his aura in

hot orange bursts. Breathing deeply, he calmed himself and the flashes of light dissipated.

“Yes. This curse is a personal one,” I said. “The witch who cast it didn’t just want people to fail at rescuing Aurora. She wanted them to despair.” I turned in a circle, seeking out something, anything, that might be a way through. The door we’d used to enter was, at least, still viable. I could force it open with an incantation, but after how far we’d come and with how much pressure Amir was under to find Aurora, I had to do what I could to find a way *forward*.

Nothing. There was nothing. Not even a crack in the maddening black walls around us. Shaking my head, I opened my eyes.

The room felt even smaller than before. The air staler. Our breathing hotter and louder.

“What do we do?” Amir asked, rubbing his neck. He seemed calmer, his question one of practicality rather than a fearful reaction.

“May I have that back please?”

“Oh.” He looked down at the moonbeam stone. “Of course.” He handed it over, and the energy in my body increased. Only a slight boost to my stores, but still, given what I needed to do, a necessary one.

“I need to talk to Red.” I made my way to a corner of the room and sat, tucking my legs beneath me.

“Red? Who—or what—is that?”

I smiled as I thought of my friend. Her penetrating light-brown eyes. The maturity and strength of her voice. The comforting warmth of her counsel. “Red has been with me, in one way or another, since I came of age.”

“She’s a spirit?”

I placed the moonbeam stone on my lap, its soft glow throwing shadows across the unforgiving stone walls. "Yes."

"Someone who died?" Amir was always fascinated by the Other World. The place all beings inevitably encountered. For many, that only occurred at the end of their life, when their body no longer tethered them to this realm. For people like me, whose bond had persisted beyond birth, there were times we existed between worlds. I didn't like to force a complete crossing, though. It was not only dangerous, but painful.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "She may have lived and died. Or perhaps she's yet to be born. She could be a guide, destined to never cross into our realm. I really don't know."

"She's not very sociable? Didn't provide her life, or death, story?"

"On the contrary, there have been times where she's come to me for no reason other than to discuss all manner of topics. At those times, it requires no effort on my part to see her, to hear her." I shifted my weight, trying in vain to ease the discomfort that came with kneeling on such a hard, uneven surface. "But she doesn't know if she's lived. If she's died. She doesn't even know if she has a name."

Amir scoffed as he considered me. His umber eyes shimmered as they reflected the light of the moonbeam stone. "What kind of being doesn't know her own name?"

"It's not her fault." Red had been with me for nearly fifteen years. When even my parents were gone, Red had been there, supporting me, demanding nothing in return. "She's an energy. A life force without a home. I imagine you'd struggle to remember things if you were in the same position."

His eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms. Suddenly, I remembered who I was speaking to.

“Forgive me, Highness.” I looked down to avoid his gaze. I couldn’t be sure if my embarrassment was because I wanted, so badly, for him to see only the good in me, or because I knew I’d overstepped. I had no right to speak to the future king like that.

Amir stepped forward and knelt in front of me. Taking my hand, he angled his head to force eye contact. His eyes were kind. Sincere. Safe. “There’s nothing to forgive, Talia.” He stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. I should have enjoyed the sensation, revelled in it even. But I was numb. Perhaps preparing myself for the taxing spell I knew I’d need to cast.

I cleared my throat and withdrew my hand. “Thank you,” I whispered. He moved to the opposite wall. He leaned back and slid down into a lotus position.

“Do you need anything from me? To contact this energy?”

“No,” I replied, squaring my shoulders. “Just don’t interrupt. Even if you think I’ve lost consciousness, or it seems as though I’m talking to myself, leave me be.”

“Understood.”

With that, I closed my eyes so I might better see the shadows that exist between the two worlds. I reached out toward the ethereal veil, the boundary around me like a damp web, a web I dared not touch without being invited to do so by one of the spirits. Not usually.

*Red? Red, can you hear me? I need you. Please.*

## Chapter Two

NOTHING.

I'd hoped Red might hear me from this side, but it seemed I would have to reach further. I took a deep breath and straightened my spine. The back of my neck grew hot as I cast my energy forward once more, this time piercing the sticky web that acted as a warning to uninvited visitors. As the threads tore open, a shrill sound reverberated through my head. Another warning to keep out. I winced as I tried to shake it off, digging my fingernails into my palm. A trick my second tutor had taught me, it was a sensory distraction from the low-level attack on my consciousness. At that moment, I existed in two places. I was in the room with Amir, but part of me was elsewhere. Somewhere. Everywhere. Nowhere.

"What are you doing?" I sensed Red's concern as she rushed toward me with the speed and ferocity of an eagle. Grabbing hold of my arms, she pushed me through the veil, returning the wandering part of my soul to my body.

Amir sat in front of me, hands on my shoulders, shaking me gently as he called my name. His concern was both welcome and invasive. I wanted him to care. But I needed him to let things play out.

I gulped in the air as though I'd been holding my breath. My ribs ached. My chest heaved. Coming home after an astral projection

through the veil felt like being resuscitated after drowning.

I shook my head as I struggled to speak. "Stop. I'm. Fine. Please."

Reluctantly, Amir returned to the other side of the room.

I dropped my head back against the wall and clenched my eyes shut. Another pair of hands touched me. Red.

She had my face in her hands, stroking my cheeks with her thumbs. "Shh. You're safe. You're back."

I nodded and concentrated on my breathing, on my heart rate. As my body adjusted to the reunion with my astral self, I opened my eyes. Red smiled at me sympathetically, her eyes widening as though she was happy to be with me again.

She'd come. She'd seen me the second I had stepped past the boundary and pulled me back through.

"Why would you do something so foolish?" She dropped her hands to my lap where they took hold of mine. A familiar, electric warmth rose through my arms, a tingling sensation that only came with being touched by a spirit I trusted.

My knees throbbed, so I repositioned myself, resting against the wall and pulling my knees into my chest. Red sat beside me but kept hold of one of my hands.

"I had to," I told her, turning my head to meet her gaze. It had been months since she'd come to see me. I'd forgotten how rich and deep the crimson tone of her hair was, the beauty of the thick curls that reached for her waist. I'd spent many years wishing she were alive, that she could exist on this side of the veil, with me. It took a long time to accept we lived in different worlds and any chance I had of a meaningful connection with another person could only be found

in my own realm. Not that I had any more of a chance of being with Amir than I did with a ghost only I could see.

“Why, Talia?” Red asked. “Stepping through without an escort is unbelievably ill-advised. You scared me. What if someone else, *something* else, had reached you before I did?”

I bit my bottom lip. “But you did find me. Like you always do.”

She sighed, the worry lines on her forehead dissolving. She looked around, noticing Amir and the unfamiliar location. “What is this place? Who is he?”

Shifting my gaze, I saw Amir was both fascinated and uncomfortable. He could see me interacting with Red, but couldn’t see nor hear her. “His name is Amir. He has been charged by the queen and king of Grimvein, his parents, to rescue Aurora, the sleeping princess.”

“The sleeping princess?” Red’s features tightened. “What does that mean?”

Of course. In whatever state my friend existed between our interactions, she was likely unaware of what went on in the corporeal realm. Why would she know of the curse?

“Almost one hundred years ago, the rulers of Oldpass offended one of the great witches. They’d heard rumours that suggested the witch, Tanit, had died, and did not invite her to the royal princess’s first birthday.”

“Tanit? I feel like that name means something to me,” Red said, running her thumb across her jawline.

“Perhaps. She’s quite a powerful creature to have been able to cast a spell this strong.”

Red raised her eyebrows as her hand fell away from her face. “I can’t recall anything specific. I assume the young girl grew up and faced some sort of trouble?”

“Yes,” I replied. I only hoped she was worth finding and could in fact reawaken Oldpass and renew the alliance between our peoples. Otherwise, Amir and I were risking our lives—and our souls—for nothing. “Aurora. She was given many gifts by the other great witches at her first birthday celebration, but when Tanit arrived, she gave the child a darkness, an overpowering desire to touch the needle of a spinning wheel on her twenty-first birthday. In doing so, she’d initiate the sleeping curse. From what I understand, Tanit wanted her parents to suffer. It wasn’t really about Aurora. But twenty years of obsessive anxiety about the fate of your daughter? An effective revenge.”

“By the gods, that’s awful. Those poor people. Knowing every single day brought your child closer to an early grave. I can’t imagine how dreadful that would feel. All because she wasn’t invited to a party? Truly?”

“There’s probably more to the story, but it’s shrouded in legend and that’s all I know. She wasn’t the only one sent into an eternal sleep. The whole city has been dormant. No one’s been able to find a way in, or if they have, they’ve never come out again.”

“But you’ve found a way?” she asked, her voice laced with excitement and fear.

I nodded. I wanted to smile at her apparent fascination with the tale, but I couldn’t. No matter what happened, I would be alone at the end of the story. If we found her, Amir would have a bride. If we failed, well...then, we’d probably be dead.

“How can I help?” Red asked.

“We’ve found an entrance to a tunnel that leads under the siege wall and into the courtyard of Oldpass. But, as you can see, the way is blocked. I need to break through.”

“Then we better get started.”

I exhaled loudly and shifted my attention to the prince. “She can help.”

“She’s really here? Right now?” Amir asked as he stood, his curiosity getting the better of him. “Does she look like us?”

“Yes, and yes,” I replied. “Red will help me find a way past the wall.”

“That’s brilliant. Can you touch her? Is she opaque?”

I looked at Red, who raised one eyebrow in response to the prince’s curiosity. She was amused by his excitement. “She’s not transparent, Amir. I suppose she’s somehow...brighter than us. The colour of her hair, her eyes, her dress...it all shines like only things made of magic can.”

“And my other question?” He waved his hand through the air, encouraging me to elaborate.

Feeling Red’s attention on me, I smiled. “Yes, she can be touched,” I replied. Then, as I considered the question further, my smile faded. “But it’s much like interacting with someone in a dream. At the time, everything seems real, feels real. But when the dream has passed, you know for certain that—as sure as you may have been at the time—it never really happened.”

“How sad.” He sighed sympathetically. “For her, I mean.”

“Yes.” I hooked my thumb around my belt, searching the floor for a way to change the subject.

“What happens now?”

“Now,” Red said, “we work.”

“He can’t hear you, remember?”

“I know, I know.” She cocked her head to the side. “But I was feeling left out.” Red crossed her arms and grinned. “Ready?”

“I am. Amir, are you ready for us to begin?”

“Hmm? Need me to do anything? Or just stay out of the way again?”

“That’s probably for the best,” Red said.

“Yes, I agree with her.”

He looked confused. The little creases between his eyebrows were sweet. Innocent, even. It must be quite marvellous to remain ignorant of the shadows that surround us. “Right. Sorry. My spirit friend says it’s best for you to stay back.”

“I may be accustomed to giving the orders most of the time, but I have no intention of disobeying some kind of powerful spirit.” The prince shrank against the door we’d come through.

Before I’d realised she had moved, Red slipped her hand into mine, entwining our fingers. My heart sped up, and I had to suppress that old, familiar pain at knowing we weren’t *truly* in the same place at the same time. Why did she still have that effect on me? Her presence, coupled with Amir’s, confused the very core of my soul. He was only a few feet away, the sound of his breathing filled the space, yet I couldn’t be with him. She held my hand, like she’d done so many times before, yet I couldn’t be with her.

With the only two beings in either world to have touched my heart so near, I felt more alone than ever before.

“What’s wrong?”

I squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Nothing. There’s nothing wrong. Tell me what to do.”

“You already know, Talia.” She stroked her thumb across the back of my hand, as she always did when I needed her strength. Just like the first time she had found me, curled up on the floor at the age of fifteen, sobbing because my parents had signed away the next twenty years of my life in an ironclad employment contract. “Now do what you do best.”

Breathing in, I closed my eyes. The room appeared in a range of red, yellow, orange, and green hues. No concealed windows or doors, not even a decent crack between blocks. Only the door we’d entered through stood out. It was darker, less colourful than the wall in which it rested.

“Red, I can’t see anything.”

“Look harder, my friend. Take what you need from me.”

Her hand seemed to melt into mine, as though her essence passed through my skin and into my blood. Hot electricity darted through my veins. The immense power of Red’s energy shocked and exhilarated me more than any drug ever could. My chest heaved as I breathed.

“Wow,” I said.

“I know.” Her voice no longer came from the space beside me, but from within, like an echo of my own thoughts.

“Won’t this hurt you?”

“You could never hurt me.”

I pushed out with my senses, feeling my way along every part of every wall. “There!” I saw through part of the wall across from the entrance as easily as if it were made of glass.

A tunnel, obscured by an enchantment unlike any I'd seen before, stretched ahead of us and beneath the boundary of Oldpass. Ascending stairs stood guard at the opposite end of the corridor and hope filled my chest—we can get through!

“You can do it, Talia.” Amir’s words pierced my concentration like sharp razors. He wanted to help, but I needed him to stay quiet.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “Time to open it.”

I stood and stepped in front of the door we’d discovered. With my index and middle fingers, I traced its outline. Amir gasped as a gold line appeared along the trail made by my fingers. I pressed my palm against the centre of the shape and pushed with the energy Red was feeding me. A loud crack bounced off the walls as the stones split apart.

“Keep going.” Red’s words caressed my soul, fortifying my weakening heart.

The stones continued to crack beneath my hand. I pulled back for a moment and then shot out again, like a runner on the homestretch, withholding nothing. My heart thundered in my ears. The stones broke apart, crumbling into a pile at my feet.

Red withdrew. Her sudden absence hurt like a bandage ripped from a still-bleeding wound, and I gasped. I reached for her and found nothing but the air, hissing gently with fading magic.

Amir wrapped his arms around my waist, catching me as I collapsed. We fell into each other, a crumpled heap of limbs on the floor. I wheezed like a fish washed ashore.

“Breathe. Just breathe.” He stroked my hair, rocking me like a babe in his arms. My pulse slowed as I let go of my second sight, allowing myself the luxury of darkness behind closed eyes. In

measured contractions, my body and mind recovered, breath by breath, moment by moment. Amir held me the whole time, his embrace both gentle and strong.

“It worked,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he replied. “You did it. That’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever witnessed. Are you okay?”

“I will be. Give me a moment. Then, we find your princess.”

## Chapter Three

WHEN I HEARD Red's muffled voice, she sounded as though she were yelling from somewhere below, deep in the dirt. "Talía! Stop!"

I froze.

Amir looked over his shoulder. "What is it?"

"There's something wrong," I replied, deadpan. There was no room for emotion. I needed to know the source of Red's fear. The unnatural silence in the tunnel manifested itself as an intense pressure pushing against my body from all directions. Blood rushed to my head on a wave of fear. She wouldn't have called out like that if it were safe to take even one more step, but I couldn't feel her presence. She'd disappeared as quickly as she'd reemerged. I was on my own.

"What do we do?" Amir moved his hand to the ornate pommel of his sword. Nothing could be achieved with that blade; surely he knew as much given their obvious isolation.

I shook my head, raising my hand so he would stay where he was.

He stood at ease and nodded. "I'll let you concentrate."

Closing my eyes, I scanned the walls and the ceiling. Nothing stood out as unusual. Moving my attention to the floor, I noticed a shadowy patch of earth directly beneath my left foot.

“Damn.” I opened my eyes. Amir’s ashen face mirrored the concern I felt overpower my own blanching features. “If I’d taken another step, I’d be dead.”

Amir gulped as his eyebrows reached for his hairline. “W-what? How? I don’t understand.”

“I’m standing on a pressure plate of some kind. My guess is that as soon as my weight is removed from the stone, something will happen. Something fatal. Your stride is larger than mine; you must have missed it.” I concentrated on keeping my voice steady. Matter-of-fact. Calm. If I could project confidence, perhaps I would feel it. *Project!* That’s it. That’s the solution. I might not have been a prince, but I was the Lead Caster. Being neither here nor there my entire life had brought me a lot of pain, but it also kept me safe.

“What is it? You just told me you could die if you move, but you’re smiling. It’s somewhat off-putting, Talia.” At least I’d lightened the mood. He seemed less anxious already.

“I can fix this,” I said, a slight grin pulling at the side of my mouth. “It’ll be fine.”

“Are there any more of these traps?”

“No. The steps are just ahead and I could only see this one. If there were others, we have passed them already.”

I’d nearly depleted myself when I’d created the door, but regardless, I needed to cast one more spell. I breathed out through my mouth, straightened my arms, and held them tightly by my sides. I pulled my shoulders back, improving my posture. Amir gulped as I bent my right knee and lifted the foot off the ground as though to take a step. Holding the leg in midair, I envisioned standing with Amir, watching my own movements from a few steps away. The

more I focused, the clearer the image became. When I'd formed an accurate outline of my short, slender body, my face, my hair, my boots, my belt... When it was all accounted for, my projected self reached toward my physical body. I took hold of my own hand and pulled, guiding my body forward, my right leg finally hitting the ground, my left leg then following it, away from the pressure trap. The moment I'd cleared the trap, my projected self disappeared and I became aware of my body again. It felt like I was being torn in half. It wasn't painful, though, more like I was a large cloth being ripped down the middle. I could feel each thread separating, and then suddenly the sensation stopped.

"Sweet mother of—"

"I know," I said. Amir's shock spread across his face like ink blotted into parchment. "I'm pretty impressed, too."

"What happens to her, though?" His eyes looked past me.

Oh, right. I'd forgotten. I turned to look at another version of myself, still standing on the pressure trap, leg raised. She was identical, yet lifeless. A statue without blood or breath or voice. Thanks to her, I still lived.

"She's not real." I kept my eyes on her. Was that really what I looked like? A three-dimensional version was so different to a reflection in the glass. Her legs weren't long, but they were strong. Straight, dark hair fell about her shoulders, emphasising the penetrating hardness of her amber eyes.

I hoped my eyes were less empty than hers.

"She's just a shell?" Amir said.

"Yes. Don't worry. She won't feel a thing."

He looked at me quizzically. I took his hand and led him up the passage as far as we could go before our way was blocked. "You don't have to watch," I told him. "But truly, she feels nothing. She's a projection, a copy made from magic. I needed something that weighed exactly the same as I do. Everything inside of her is dead. Recycled energy that constantly hovers about us all."

"I feel like we should witness whatever happens to her. It seems wrong to turn away."

"I understand."

I pressed my palms together and intertwined my fingers. A thick, dull ache had formed in my chest. A side effect of casting. I did my best to ignore the heaviness, to infuse my words with magic drawn from the Other World.

"*Ad liberos!*" Within a second, the copy slumped forward—a marionette released by its master.

A loud pop sounded as the pressure plate activated. Spectacular light flooded the passageway as an intense, narrow column of blue flame shot up from the stone and swallowed her form. The heat of the spell forced Amir and me to turn away, to bury our faces in our arms. A smell something like burnt feathers assaulted my nostrils and lodged in the back of my throat.

"By the goddess." He righted himself and tugged at his tunic. "There's nothing left. That flame must have been hotter than any I ever knew was possible."

"Tanit." I swallowed. "She is powerful." I wondered what had come of her. No one had seen her since Oldpass fell, but surely such a being was ageless. I doubted she had died. Not yet, anyway. Time

would ravage the witch eventually, I supposed, but I could only assume it would take much longer than normally expected.

“Are you sure the copy felt nothing?”

“No more than a piece of pottery that falls to the floor, my prince. I promise.”

With that, he sighed, as though exhaling his concern. His face softened. “You know,” he said with a grin. “You’re starting to make me look bad. I’m yet to do much at all to help with this rather perilous journey.”

I tapped his chest lightly with the back of my hand. “Don’t worry, my prince, I’m sure there will be something for you to do soon enough. Though you may regret wishing for such a thing.”

As we ascended the moss-covered stone steps, fresh air entered through gaps in the antiquated hatch. I wouldn’t consider myself claustrophobic, but at that moment, breathing in the cool air from the world above, I was immensely grateful to have reached the end of the tunnel.

“You’re tired,” Amir said, squeezing the top of my shoulder. “I’ll open this one.”

“I’m not going to argue.” I smiled half-heartedly. The ache in my chest had dissipated, but breaking a hole in a thick, sturdy wall and then creating a projection so soon after had drained the energy from my limbs as surely as running around the entire perimeter of Grimvein would have. “It’s all yours.” I descended a few steps and then sat and leaned my head against the cold stone. I released the top button of my jacket, exposing my collarbone so I might better knead the side of my neck.

“Could you please hold that stone up?” Amir climbed as high as he could before the way was blocked, and then turned to press his back against the wood. “Here goes,” he said, trepidation hanging from his words. Bending at the knees, he pushed against the hatch. It groaned and creaked in response, but did not open. Given his substantial height and build, it must have been incredibly heavy.

As Amir worked to push it open, I wondered what would be on the other side. According to the king, the tunnel should have brought us beneath the centre of the royal courtyard, allowing us to bypass the walls. The last group to try and penetrate those walls was impaled by rusty pikes as thick as a man’s leg. There was no real way to know which stones were safe to climb and which were going to ignite one of the traps left behind by Tanit’s curse. Best to avoid them altogether.

But what if the tunnel was no better? What if we were about to set off yet another trap, much like the pikes or the pressure plate? My hands started to shake.

“Wait,” I called out.

Alarmed, Amir met my eyes. “What is it, Talia?” He moved to join me. “Have you sensed something?”

Despite my best efforts, a tear had formed in the corner of my eye. “Are you sure this is worth the risk?”

He covered my left hand with his, holding it in place in my lap. Lit from below by the stone in my right hand, Amir’s features would’ve seemed menacing if not for the genuine concern flashing in his eyes.

“Are you scared?”

I pulled my hand out from beneath his and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. I couldn’t deal with his touch. Not at

that moment. It was too distracting, too difficult to process, given it was meant only to comfort and nothing more.

“I suppose I am. We’ve no idea what’s up there.”

“No, we don’t.” He positioned himself on the same step as me but on the opposite end, and interlaced his fingers as he gazed at the floor. “But we’ve found the way in. Surely we have a responsibility to press on?”

A responsibility? To whom? There was nobody Amir owed his life to. Few men grew up as he did, surrounded by privilege and afforded every opportunity one could imagine, yet still possessed such a selfless heart. That meant something. Not just to me, but to the people he’d one day rule as a just and compassionate king. They needed him to live as much as I did. His parents, surely, had not really meant what they said before he left. They loved Amir. They would never disinherit him, even if we did fail.

“Talia, you’re the most adept caster in my parents’ kingdom. If anyone can protect us, it’s you.”

He had such faith in me. I didn’t understand why. Yes, I might have been born with the sight, with an ability to manipulate the energies around me, but the person responsible for the sleeping curse could do so much more. Tanit could *create* energy. And destroy it.

“You’re willing to bet your life on my abilities?”

He closed his eyes, touching his fingertips to his lips. “Yes.”

“Do you *want* to marry this princess?” I couldn’t believe I’d just said that. The prince and I had become fairly comfortable with each other over the past couple of weeks, but we’d never once broached

the topic of what would happen after Aurora woke. We'd silently designated the topic taboo.

Amir shifted his weight, the heels of his boots scraping across an uneven stone. "It's what must happen." His tone was devoid of emotion, like a tutor reading from an unfamiliar text.

I bit my lower lip, thinking of the predicament Grimvein's ruling family found themselves in, of the power-mad ruler to the north claiming sovereignty over not just her own kingdom, but all of them. "Because of Braedon."

"Because of Braedon." His voice was solemn. "We need Oldpass. Only an alliance will provide adequate protection from that blasted mad woman's forces. Braedon's queen threatens to invade and so my parents threaten disinheritance. I'm not sure who is more desperate, she or they."

I rubbed at my forehead for a moment. "It's a matter of duty, then." I'd known this already, but his avoidance of my original question gave me some glimmer of hope. Perhaps he didn't feel drawn to Aurora, as he would have if he were really linked to her by destiny. If he were bound to the princess by magic, by love, he should have been able to feel her calling to him. He should have felt compelled to find her.

"Everything in my life is a matter of duty, Talia. But if we really do have the ability to save this woman, we should. She's been stuck here for a hundred years, and not just her, but every other person who didn't leave before she drew blood on that spindle."

"You're right." I sighed. Damn his wisdom. His altruism. "Who knows how many people have missed out on a huge piece of their lives because of Tanit's vengeance? We should help them."

“We should,” he echoed. We let the heavy silence hang between us for a few seconds. “Feel better now?”

I forced a smile. “A little. If we do find Aurora Rose, there won’t be much I can do to wake her. You know that, right?”

“Yes.” He leaned back to rest on his elbows. “The curse requires true love’s kiss. I’ve no idea if such a thing as true love really exists, but perhaps, if we work together, we can find a way to rouse her.”

“It does exist.” My words were blunt, but honest. “It’s the purest form of magic in the universe. That’s why it can break even the darkest, most powerful spell.”

“But how can true love exist between people who’ve never even met? It seems impossible.”

“No, it’s possible.” I felt my confidence returning, as it always did when we discussed immortal forces. “It is there before you meet. You just don’t acknowledge or understand it. All the moments that come after that first meeting only serve to help you believe, to help you trust that the electricity passing between you is real.”

He sat upright and considered me, his eyes intense and serious. “That’s beautiful.”

*You’re beautiful.* How badly I wanted to say the words. My chest tightened as I fought the urge to lean forward, to take his hand, to tell him that even though I was terrified of what might wait for us above, I’d never wanted to be anywhere else more than I wanted to be there, with him. Well, almost never.

The memory of Red’s spirit entwining with mine, strengthening me, protecting me, pulled me out of the world of fantasy and back into the real world. At least there was one thing that could drag me

out of that vortex of fantasy and desire. One thing strong enough to pull me in another, albeit hopeless, direction.

I swallowed, forcing the misshapen, grainy lump in my throat back into my stomach where I could best control it. "Yes, well, I interrupted you." I shifted my gaze to the hatch. "Was it starting to budge?"

He followed my line of sight and nodded. "It's old, the hinges are rusty, but yes, I think it will yield."

Using a technique my predecessor had taught me, I worked at regaining my strength as he worked at the hatch. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the in-and-out rhythm of my breathing. I extracted the nutrients offered by the air, by the mystical particles hidden deep within the molecules of each inhalation. I envisioned their journey through my body, forcing my muscles to accept the healing properties of nature's purest and smallest gifts.

My eyes opened when I heard the distinct screech of rusty hinges giving way. Amir huffed as he straightened his legs one last time. The hatch swung open, banging against the ground as it found its destination, and Amir stood straight. After the muted glow of my moonbeam stone, the fierce natural light that flooded the stairway forced me to turn away, and I hissed like a threatened cat.

"Are you all right?" Amir said.

I blinked several times and returned my stone to its pouch. "Yes, I'm fine. I seem to have forgotten what daylight looks like."

"It doesn't take long." He offered me his hand. I hesitated at first, but there was no real reason to turn down such a simple gesture. I slid my hand into his and used it to stand.

“Thanks.” I dusted off my pants and readjusted my cloak. “Nice work,” I said as we both emerged into the courtyard. “Wow.”

Bordered by a colonnade, the centre of the royal palace had succumbed to golden vines and pink wisteria that choked every surface and artefact in the area. Weeds and grasses broke through ornate marble tiles, some having toppled decorative outdoor chairs. Children of the goddess, the trees and flowers had reclaimed what would’ve once been their domain. Incredible.

An impressive entablature not only held the columns and pediments in place, but was decorated by a breathtaking frieze. The story of the goddess giving birth to the first fairies played out in frozen marble images, each one executed with mastery by a true artist.

Turning on the spot, Amir scanned the palace. As he did, small pebbles cracked beneath his feet, breaking the dense, eerie silence that had descended on us the moment we stopped speaking. The quietude seemed alive, somehow.

“Wow, indeed,” he said. “This palace is much larger than the one at home.” He waved his arm, indicating the length of the building and its many doorways.

“It’s certainly spectacular.” I took in more details of the scene. Windowpanes beyond the pillars were caked with dust. One door had been irreparably scarred by a ghastly wound, perhaps the result of an axe. Had someone else made it this far? I realised there were several possible exits from the courtyard. “But, which way do we go? I count four towers.”

“Hmm.” He rubbed the back of his hand against his cheek. “Good point. How are we to know which one she will be in?” He looked past

me, his eyes glassy and wide. "I'd say that she's in the north tower."

"Why? How do you know?"

"Because of them." He pointed with his chin, and I turned.

"By the goddess." I gulped, hardly able to believe what was happening in front of us. Four waist-height statues lined up in front of the north alcove were changing colour, the stone flaking away like leaves in the wind, leaving behind repulsive, scaly skin afflicted by oozy sores. Stumpy fingers and toes started to wriggle as the trapped entities became aware of their wakeful state, the final shards of rock falling from their putrid bodies.

I'd never actually seen such creatures in real life. They were the stuff of nightmares and feverish dreams.

"Goblins," Amir said dryly.

I nodded. "Goblins."

## Chapter Four

“NOW MIGHT BE the time for that sword to make an appearance.” As I whispered, I stepped backwards, slowly, quietly. If the stories I’d heard about goblins were true, they possessed an immunity to my magical attacks.

The goblin on the left opened its bulging orange eyes and blinked like someone who’d been staring at the sun and needed to adjust their vision. A globule of thick, yellow pus pushed its way out of the corner of the creature’s left eye. My stomach churned.

“Amir?”

“Yes,” he replied in a low voice, his backward steps mirroring mine. “Give me a moment.” He started to draw his sword from its scabbard, taking care to do so quietly. As the other three goblins shook their limbs and licked their thick, cracked lips, the one on the left let out a fearful cry. Somehow shrill and deep all at once, the discordant noise tore through my head as sure as any spike. I crouched and wrapped my arms around my head. Amir used the opportunity to release his sword in one confident motion.

“Talia. The pillars.” He pointed with his sword, and I nodded as I stood.

Orange. Black. White. Yellow. Each pair of eyes stared at us, each different in colour and shape, yet equally penetrative. Why were they just staring at us? Orange Eyes opened his mouth to

reveal six stumpy flat teeth and two long stained fangs. He cocked his head and groaned. In unison, the four of them took a single step forward. I could feel their gaze in the bottom of my stomach, clawing at my insides like angry insects.

“What are they doing?” I whispered. “They’re not attacking.”

“I’ve no idea,” Amir replied. “But they’re definitely locked onto us. Let’s move.”

The moment I turned, the goblin quad leapt forward. I yelled out as they charged. Yellow Eyes pulled something long and tubular from his pocket. He pinched it between his swollen dirt-brown lips and blew. A projectile flew toward us. Amir flung his sword out and deflected the dart. It skittered across the pebbles covering the ground.

“Go!” He pushed me toward the thick columns a few metres to our left. My heart thundered as we sprinted. The clamour of the goblins’ armour as they moved grew louder, as did my own breathing.

I skirted around a column and crouched, but the prince wasn’t with me. The distinct scrape of metal against metal echoed all around. I tried to peek past the edge of the column, but another dart flew towards me. I didn’t move fast enough, and the sharp point clipped the top of my ear. I hissed and took cover again, protecting the hot wound with my hand. Sounds of battle continued to rage within the courtyard.

“Dammit!” I elbowed the stone behind me angrily. I needed to get out there. I needed to help. He couldn’t hold off four assailants at once, even with the advantage of size.

A growl, a thud, a yelp.

*Amir!* Pushing off my knees, I jumped to full height and ran into the courtyard. My feet nearly slid out from under me when I saw the dead body on the ground. The dead, human body.

“What are you doing?” Amir yelled over his shoulder as he continued to parry. To thrust. To dodge. “Get back!” Three goblins circled him, lunging and prodding, but somehow, in a flurry of steps and swings, he continued to protect himself. His face glistened with sweat. He bit into his bottom lip, grunting under his strain.

I threw my hands up. “*Mentem revocare caeli!*” A strong blast of air hit the trio. They flew backwards, one hitting a column with a frightful howl and then falling limp against the ground. He was breathing, but unconscious. The other two skidded along the loose ground like stones across a lake. As soon as they came to a halt, they shook their heads and worked to stand.

Amir used the distraction to rush back to me. Sucking in deep breaths of air, he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. “Please. Hide,” he panted. “Suspect your magic can’t hurt them.”

“Not directly. But I can make it harder for them to move.” I needed to help, to do something. We had to keep going. I’d had my doubts before, but in that moment, as we faced something I truly thought might stop us from reaching our destination, I knew it was our destiny to find Aurora. No matter how it might change my fate, or Amir’s, we had to get to her. I’d make sure we found a way.

White Eyes made it to his feet first, his glassy stare fixed upon us as he sidestepped towards his companions. It seemed they preferred to attack as a group.

“Where did he come from?” I asked. Amir followed my gaze to the fair-haired young man lying on the ground in a naked heap.

Whoever he'd been, he made a tragically beautiful corpse. "And where did Yellow Eyes go?"

"It's him," Amir replied. His chest heaved as he watched our attackers regrouping with the intensity of an eagle stalking its prey. "That's the other goblin. I bested him, he hit the ground, then transformed."

"I don't under—"

He shouldered me and forced me back a step, running forwards to meet the recovered goblins. Tired as he might have been, the prince seemed to be holding them off effectively. I wanted to help him, but I could sense their immunity to my direct attacks. A web surrounded them, much like the one that divided this world from the Other. The best I could do was throw things at them. Slow them down.

Despite my guilt and frustration, I turned and knelt next to the handsome man—barely more than a boy—who'd been lost to this realm.

"Who are you?" I whispered. I pressed my ear to his chest and a hand to his stomach. The chill invading his skin frightened me, but I needed answers. Drawing in a breath, I closed my eyes. His spirit was about to cross the veil. I called out to him. He turned, and I gasped at the sight of his beautiful brown eyes. They were icy and sad, yet somehow full of empathy. If I'd had more time, I would have drawn him to me, into my arms. Though I knew nothing of his origins, not even his name, the scale of his loss was both obvious and immeasurable.

Somewhere in the distance, the clash of swords and the scuffling of boots registered. Amir still lived.

I repeated my question to the boy's spirit, and his face softened. He pulled at his dark brown cloak, shifting it aside to expose the regalia stitched into his tunic. A blazing golden dragon, it stood on its hind legs, short, scaly arms reaching for the sky. The royal emblem of the family Rose. The family who'd ruled Oldpass for centuries.

"You're a prince," I whispered, my heart heavy. "You're Aurora's brother."

The young man nodded, a thick strand of chestnut-coloured hair obscuring one of his eyes as he did. The goblins weren't goblins at all. They were the four teenage sons of the queen and king. Two sets of twins. Everyone had assumed the boys were, like their older sister, asleep somewhere in the city, breathing, yet not aging. Resting, yet not at peace. Those poor boys had been afflicted by something much worse. Such a transformation spell, trapping both their memories and their bodies, would have left them aware of the passage of time. For a hundred years, the goblins would have remained frozen inside their stone prisons, bloodthirsty and frustrated, yet totally unaware of their own identities and completely incapable of movement. Until we passed some invisible threshold that woke them up, called them to arms to protect the curse that facilitated their torment. Aurora might have been the linchpin of Tanit's machinations, but she was by no means its only victim, nor its most afflicted. This madness had to come to an end.

My chest ached as the prince, no more than seventeen years old, cried, silently pleading with me. Though he'd not discovered his voice—the transition to the Other World could be jarring to any freshly deceased person—his message was as clear as any I'd ever received.

*Please. Save my family.*

"I will," I replied. "I promise!" His form started to glow and then distort, as though he were being swallowed up by a rippling body of water. It was the ethereal veil. He was moving beyond the space that hung between our worlds into a place I could not follow. With a final shimmering reflection, his form disappeared. I wiped the tears away from my face, straightened my spine, and willed my projected form to return to my body.

Only moments had passed, yet the prince's body felt even colder beneath me. I sat upright and looked down at him. The gaping wound in his chest no longer bled. "We will release them," I told him, my voice as determined as my thoughts. My ear throbbed where the dart had cut away my flesh, but I pushed the pain aside as I stood.

"Amir!" The ferocity in my voice shocked even me. The prince of Grimvein, my friend, had stood his ground bravely. A gash to his cheek trickled blood but was the only wound I could see.

"What is it?" he called out, as he rolled to avoid another blow. Fatigue invaded his limbs. I could see the dull, throbbing blackness of it clouding his body.

"You need to stop."

"Stop?" My prince hissed as Black Eyes slashed at his belly at the same time Orange Eyes punched him in the side. He'd not been able to avoid both attacks, and a thin line of red bled through the front of his tunic. "That's a good way to get me killed."

"Then, run!" I shrieked. I needed him to get away. To let me see all three goblins at once. There could be nothing between them and me. Incantations are one of the most powerful, yet most dangerous forms of magic. If my words encountered any physical barriers, the

force with which I imbued them might be distorted. The results could be disastrous. “Head for one of the doors. Anything. Just get out of the way.”

“I hope you know—” He kicked at a goblin, knocking its small blade to the ground. “—what you’re doing.”

I hoped so, too. Amir twisted his body in an impressive evasion, withdrawing from the fray and running towards the column I’d been hiding behind. The three cursed princes snarled and huffed as they gave chase.

With nothing between myself and the goblins, I pulled my arms in to my chest, drawing every scrap of the divine in the air towards me. As I spoke, I laced each syllable with the energy I’d collected, as well as the innate magic that’d always lived within me. It was a warming sensation that never ceased to make me feel both energised and terrified.

*“Memoriala Mandetis!”*

The collective howl released by the brothers reverberated through my bones, as though they experienced ecstasy, torment, and release all at once. They each toppled over as their memories raged within them, clawing through their bodies, fighting for purchase in their discoloured minds. Amir watched in disbelief, his mouth hanging open in a demented sneer. I’d never seen him appear... ugly. So, he was as imperfect as the rest of us, after all.

“What’s happening?” he yelled, hunching over.

“They’re fighting to find their way home,” I replied. “We can do no more.”

The wails of the goblin brothers grew deeper but quieter as they writhed on the ground, the pebbles crackling beneath them adding to

the unnatural cacophony. Their skin changed colour as though it might turn back to stone, yet it did not harden.

“Enough!” Orange Eyes called out in a human-sounding voice, thrashing his arms to the side. His fingers elongated, his legs reached outward, the marbled complexion melting away to expose a milky cinnamon tone. The changes seemed to cause him no pain, nor did his bones creak or crack as they rearranged. No, the reformation of the Oldpass prince didn’t hurt because he wasn’t being broken. He was being repaired, his essence refilling the mould to which it belonged.

“By the goddess,” Amir said as he fell to his knees. “They’re people.”

Silver armour fell away from the restored prince’s body as his two brothers continued to struggle nearby. Their memories swarmed troubled minds. Traces of the images and thoughts seeping through their muscles were visible like a cleansing misty cloud. The problem was that they themselves could not seem to decide what images were real and which were propagated by Tanit’s curse.

Amir rushed forward, unfastened his cloak, and threw it about the now-naked body of what used to be the goblin with orange eyes. The fair-skinned teenager tapped Amir’s hand gratefully and then pulled the cloak tighter about himself. This must’ve been the twin of the boy lying dead on the ground across the courtyard, their thoughtful chocolate-brown eyes and smooth cheekbones identical. He rolled onto his stomach and pushed onto his hands and knees before releasing a horrid cough. A pungent, thick fluid fell out of his mouth and onto the ground as he continued to cough and gag. I could

practically taste the bile in my own throat as I looked on, my stomach squirming.

As though the disturbing expulsion were a signal, his two brothers flung their arms outward as he'd done moments earlier, their legs stiffening and lengthening as their own transformations began. Pus-ridden, angry orbs dissolved, replaced by humanistic brown eyes. Straight auburn hair pushed through the changing skin atop their heads, stopping short at their ears.

These two were younger, perhaps fourteen or so. As their older sibling stood unsteadily, the younger twins coughed up the remnants of Tanit's spell, their naked backs heaving with the effort. I wished I could help them somehow, help them erase the bitter, awful taste of dark magic from their mouths and their souls, but there was nothing more I could do. The eldest brother stood to his full height, though he was several centimetres shorter than Amir, who remained behind him, sword still in hand.

"I'm Callum. The firstborn prince of Oldpass." The young man's lips trembled, his eyes weary. Callum's words projected confidence, though the rest of him did not. "Who are you?"

"This is my prince." I pointed. "His Highness Amir of Grimvein."

Callum turned from me to Amir and back again. "I know of no Amir in Grimvein. Their rulers have only daughters. I am to marry their eldest in four years, should we still wish to do so." Oh, no. Another person he has lost. Were we rescuing these people or damning them?

"Talia tells the truth," Amir said calmly. "My parents are the king and queen of Grimvein. The princess you were betrothed to, Rima, is my great-grandmother. She lived a long life but has been gone for

almost ten years. A great deal has happened since you were last here.”

“Yes.” He looked about the dilapidated courtyard, his gaze detached and discerning at the same time. I couldn’t begrudge his stoicism. If I’d received such confronting news, I would have switched off my feelings as well.

The young man looked to his brothers, who sat awkwardly on the ground, attempting to cover their bodies with their hands. Before I could speak again, Callum rushed through the doorway the four goblin statues had been guarding.

He returned moments later with cloaks and passed them to the boys. “Where is Anton?”

I took a step and pressed my palm to Callum’s cheek. He flinched but did not pull away. Poor man. He had not been touched in nearly a hundred years. Though he might not remember exactly what’d happened, he would sense his isolation. He *felt* it.

“I’m sorry. We...we didn’t know.”

“He is here,” Amir said as he stepped aside, revealing their fallen brother. Anton. “It was me. I did this.”

Callum’s younger brothers half ran, half crawled towards Anton’s body. One stopped a few feet short and fell back again, unable to close the distance entirely. The other gingerly touched his fingertips to Anton’s grey face. Callum looked on, stoic and still.

After a few tortuously long moments, he spoke in a deadpan voice. “He’s dead.”

Amir and I both nodded.

By the goddess. If only I could change it. If only I could rewrite the rules of magic, drag Anton’s spirit back through the veil, and

restore it to the lifeless vessel that now rested in a pool of its own blood. If I'd left them as goblins, they would have never realised what had happened. The time that had passed. The people they'd lost. They'd never have known Amir had killed their brother.

Faster than I could register what happened, Callum lunged and slammed Amir into the ground. The younger twins shuffled farther away and looked on. Callum seemed unstoppable as his fists flew through the air, back and forth, hitting Amir, who tried to shield his face with his arms.

"No!" I screamed as I ran. My feet fell out from under me, and I slid along the pebbles. My skin burned hot, my chest grew tight, and my lips dry. "Stop it!" I yelled from the ground. "I don't want to hurt you, but...but I-I..." The two men in front of me blurred as I struggled to speak, to control my tongue, which felt as heavy as stone. "Amir..." My voice sounded wrong. Weak and hollow. My skin flushed hot again as the side of my face hit the ground. Everything went black.

## Chapter Five

I'VE ALWAYS HATED dreams. They have a way of fooling us into thinking we are something we are not. Safe. Not safe. Loved. Not loved. Whatever the case, dreams—unlike visions from and of the Other World—leave an acrid taste in my mouth. The courtyard fell away, and I was left only with illusion. Faces. Words. Feelings. My mother and father, their shock as I cast my first spell, a moment I couldn't possibly remember. Red lying on a bed of silk, alive and corporeal. Amir in a library, lost in an ancient tome. These images (and others I found indecipherable) melted together like storm clouds.

“Talía.” Amir's voice sliced through the dreams and reminded me of where we were. What we were doing. I tried to open my eyes, but a searing pain shot through my head from ear to ear. Large hands prevented me from sitting up. “Slow down, caster,” my prince said.

Someone pressed a cold, damp cloth to my forehead, cheeks, and neck. I delighted in the coolness, having not truly realised how hot my face felt until that moment. I licked my dry lips and swallowed the sandpaper texture that coated my throat. The stiffness in my fingers and toes faded as I wriggled and stretched them.

By the goddess, what happened? My body felt as though every ounce of hydration had been siphoned from it, whilst a herd of mice had been pulling at my hair, making my scalp throb. The rigid tip of a

flask touched my mouth, and I invited the water in. It was stale, but I didn't care. It could have been mud and I would have accepted it, as long as there was some moisture to deliver to my shrivelled limbs.

"Slow down, slow down." Amir pressed his hand to my cheek as he spoke, and I forced myself to stop drinking before I drowned. The warmth of his touch was comforting, and for once, I didn't wish it signified anything other than concern. "Do you want to try and sit up now?"

I gave a heavy nod and tried once more to open my eyes. I did so more cautiously than before, prying them open gradually so I might better adjust to the influx of light, colour, and detail. After blinking away the hazy film that impaired my vision, I found myself inside a large, dust-ridden room, lying on a chaise, surrounded by young men. Had I been three times stronger, five years younger, and ten times more irresponsible, it might have even been a good position to find myself in. As it was, it felt awful.

Amir knelt next to me and held my hand, his normally kind features distorted by worry. Behind him, the three brothers Rose paced about the chamber, each one looking through the glassless window as he passed it, as though someone or something might be upon us at any moment.

"Can she move yet?" Callum stopped pacing to stand by Amir. He ran his hand back through his unkempt hair before folding his arms across his narrow chest.

"Give her a moment," Amir replied sternly, his eyes set on me. He'd changed his bloodstained shirt. I hoped that meant his wound had been cleaned and bandaged whilst I'd been asleep.

“It’s been hours,” one of the younger brothers said. It was the first time I’d heard either of the other twins speak, and the deep tone of his voice surprised me, given the boyishness of his face.

“I know!” Amir whipped around to face them, releasing my hand as he did. The absence of his touch was palpable. He sighed as though disappointed by his outburst. When he spoke again, he lowered his volume and softened his tone. “I know, Sebastian. We will be on our way soon.”

The boy, Sebastian, huffed, walked to a nearby wall, and slid down it to fall into a defeated heap on the floor. A trail of cleared dust marked the movement of his back along the wall.

It had been hours? I needed to get up. They needed me to get up. I swallowed again, braced my hands against the chaise, and pushed. I expected the movement to hurt more than it did, but instead of pain, there was only weakness, similar to the sensation after a particularly taxing spell. I breathed my way through the discomfort as I moved into a sitting position. Amir turned to me to help.

“It’s fine. You don’t need to rush,” he told me.

“It sounds like I do,” I croaked. “I’m fine.” Well, perhaps fine was too generous a description, but I was improving quickly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I took another sip of water, emptying the flask. “The fog is clearing. What happened?” I held my hand to Amir’s chin. Though I tried to be gentle, he winced. His jaw was swollen, his lip cut. That’s right. He and Callum. They were fighting.

“You were poisoned,” Sebastian said from his position on the floor.

I touched my fingertips to my earlobe and instantly regretted it when a sharp bolt of heat shot through the side of my head. "The dart," I said when the pain passed.

Amir nodded.

"I'm not dead, though. I imagine it was pegrarus."

"That's what it smelled like." Callum joined Amir and looked at me, his eyes empathetic. "I'm sorry I attacked your friend. After we found somewhere for you to rest, he explained what happened to my twin." He sucked in a breath and hardened his face, trying to push down his grief. I couldn't blame him. There was so much for him to process, much to mourn. Had I found myself in his position, I doubt I could have coped even half as well. "I know it couldn't be helped."

I shook my head tentatively, partially due to a fear of setting off that horrid pain again, but also because the moment felt somehow sacred and fragile. "No. We had no idea who you were. If it helps at all, I can tell you that Anton crossed the veil in his true form. He knew who he was. Who you were."

Sebastian's twin, whose name I still hadn't learned, sat down next to Sebastian and took his hand in a gesture of comfort.

Tears slid down Callum's stubbled cheeks. "Thank you," he murmured. "It isn't your fault. It's Tanit's."

"Yes," Amir spat as he looked heavenward. "Her curse is so much viler than people have believed all this time." I could see he was hurting, my dear Amir. As he was both exhausted and exasperated, the reality of what we'd discovered in Oldpass clawed at his face like a rash. He'd taken the life of an innocent boy. He had probably thought I was going to die when I passed out. He still

needed to find Aurora and, as his parents wished, marry her. His choleric tone was most certainly warranted.

"I still can't believe it's been a hundred years," Sebastian said, rubbing at his knee caps. "I don't remember being a statue. I don't remember attacking the two of you. Yet I feel weary somehow, like my bones know they've been frozen in place."

"Yes." His twin stood as he spoke, eyebrows drawn together in dismay. He held his hand out to Sebastian and dragged his brother to his feet.

"We need to keep ourselves together, Elias. We still have each other," Callum soothed. He had the confidence of a young man who knew he'd be a trusted royal adviser—perhaps even a king—one day. He seemed to accept responsibility without hesitation.

I looked to Elias. I finally knew the third brother's name. Third brother. When he should have been the fourth. How could I have not seen who they really were from the moment their stony skin flaked away? I *should* have. It was my fault. The dead boy. Amir's injuries. The crestfallen weight hanging upon their backs. My failure as a caster had brought it all to pass.

"We lost Anton," Callum said, "but we don't have to lose Aurora. Or anyone else in our kingdom, for that matter. They're all still here. Somewhere." As the eldest brother spoke, Amir guided me to my feet, and Elias handed me another flask of water. I thanked them both wordlessly. "You two believe she is in the north tower?"

"You seemed to wake when we got closer to the north wing entrance," Amir replied. "I think it reasonable to assume you—the goblins, rather—were placed there as guards."

"I agree." Callum looked to his brothers. "Our sister needs us."

“Then let’s go!” Elias’s face reddened as he barrelled toward the door. I couldn’t help but smile softly. The genuine love and concern radiating from his soft features touched me. Surely, it was a sign Aurora must be a good person, that she could be worthy of Amir. Did I want her to be? Would it be easier if she were unkind? Or unintelligent?

Sebastian and Callum wasted no time in following Elias as he disappeared through the doorway and into a dark passage. Amir slipped one arm around my waist as an offer of support, but I shook my head. My strength returned to me quickly, and I needed to distance myself from him as much as possible. Each step closer to the princess pushed him ever further out of my reach. I was surprised to find the thought a degree less painful than the last time I’d lingered on it, though I still felt I was headed in the right direction, finding my destined path. Was I finally accepting the situation for what it was? Or was something else going on?

“Don’t go that way.” Red’s voice tickled the back of my neck like a benign spider. “They must find another route.”

“Where are you?” I said. Amir looked at me, confused. “She’s here. My friend. My guide. Red...why can’t I see you?”

“Something holds me.” Her voice was quieter, the distance between us increasing. “I can’t stay.”

I wanted to chase her, to find her, to see her sterling-green eyes and know for certain she was all right. But I knew she wasn’t. Something was pulling her away. I could sense it, an icy chill tracing its way down my spine. It had hurt her to reach out and speak to me. I couldn’t be sure how I knew, but I did.

“What did she say?” Amir asked as he stepped through the doorway, his dark tunic and leggings swallowed up by the dankness of the corridor.

“Don’t,” I blurted. “She said not to go that way. Stop!”

A thunderous growl echoed all around us. A tormented beast’s yowl shot through me like electricity. What had those boys rushed into?

“We have to help them,” Amir shouted as he ran toward the sound. It was like nothing I’d ever heard before: guttural and deep, yet piercing at the same time. The animal making that noise could not have been of this world. I dropped the flask Elias had handed me as I raced after Amir. It made no noise as it hit the ground. There was no sound to be heard but the creature’s wails.

Mould and damp accosted my nostrils and the back of my throat as I chased after the four princes. My heart raced and my chest ached at the exertion I wasn’t truly recovered enough to cope with. I nearly lost my footing on a smooth stone and braced against the wall before continuing on.

Suddenly, it was quiet. The unnatural stillness terrified me even more than the creature’s growling, and I stopped. In such abrupt darkness and silence, I felt as though the sound of my footsteps could somehow shatter the universe. *Don’t be ridiculous*. I exhaled my fear and started moving again.

The passageway grew hotter, drops of sweat sliding down my spine as I unclasped my cloak and draped it over one shoulder. I skulked past several alcoves leading into other areas of the north wing. Could there be people within the rooms, enduring an endless sleep?

The heat became unbearable as I stepped into a capacious room. I could sense its size more than see it. "Amir?" I whispered, though my voice was amplified by the acoustics of the space and became louder than I'd anticipated.

"Look out!" Callum called from somewhere ahead of me. A stream of orange and blue fire shot toward the sound of his voice. Menacing shadows danced across the walls and ceiling for a moment before the bolt of heat and light disappeared as quickly as it had come. I hadn't even realised I'd thrown my body to the floor until I was dragging myself back to my feet.

An arm brushed past me. "Caster," Callum whispered. "Can you see anything?" I shook my head and cursed myself inwardly. He couldn't see me.

"Talia?" he said, more insistent this time.

The moonbeam stone. How could I forget I had it? Red's precious gift had saved me many times before. "I have a light," I replied as quietly as I could. "But will it not endanger us?"

"We are already in danger. I can't see my brothers. Do it!"

I retrieved the stone from my belt and forced a surge of energy into the centre, sending beams of moonlight into the cavernous space, brighter than I'd ever seen it generate before.

My breath caught in my throat. Callum and I both stepped back as we gazed upon the creature sitting motionless in the centre of the elegant but aging ballroom.

Earlier that day, I hadn't believed stories about goblins could be real. I'd been wrong. But surely such an animal as this existed only in legend? Incredulity rushed through my veins with an explosive

force. A bulbous lump formed in my throat as I struggled to absorb the sight before me.

A dragon.

## Chapter Six

THE ANIMAL SEEMED to be asleep, despite the stream of fire it'd just released. Perhaps it responded to sound or movement, similar to the way the goblins had been called to arms as Amir and I had made noise in the courtyard.

"Sebastian!" Callum's brothers stood against a wall several metres away, remaining perfectly still, as did Amir another few metres past them. They all looked toward the sound of the eldest prince's manic voice.

The dragon's obsidian eyes burst open, two perfectly round discs bulging out of a savage, bony skull the colour of molten rock. Callum's face distorted as he realised what he'd done. He held his arm up in front of me, a futile gesture. The dragon blew tendrils of smoke through the slitted nostrils resting above its elongated jaw.

Sebastian, Elias, and Amir all ran toward us, following the circular wall. The dragon's wings expanded slowly, as though it were stretching after a long period of inactivity. Scales on the underside of its body reflected a beautiful, metallic rainbow as rays from my stone brightened them. If it didn't possess the ability to stamp each of us out as easily as a human might destroy an insect, the creature would have been nothing short of stunning.

The dragon reared onto its tree-trunk-like legs, arching a coarse, agile neck. At full height, she was the epitome of strength and regal

prowess. She? Yes, I decided. That magnificent dragon was a female. I felt it, just as I felt magic—simply...there.

The five of us huddled together, despite knowing our proximity offered no protection. An unspoken message passed between Amir and Callum as the two locked eyes, both reaching for their swords. Slowly. Gingerly.

The dragon watched us but did not attack. She cocked her head and huffed, her forceful breath sending particles of dust flying through the room, illuminated by the magic of my stone. Her ancient-looking gaze locked onto us as she released an intimidating, throaty purr.

“Are you ready?” Amir mouthed to Callum, who responded with a nod. Both of them held their swords at shoulder height, primed to attack.

A cold rush of air pressed against my neck, like the hand of a corpse, but then it was gone again. Could it have been Red trying to tell me something? I hoped not, for if she couldn’t project her voice to me, something truly dangerous had been happening in the Other World.

“This is wrong,” I said. The words came from my lips, yet I hadn’t thought them. They simply erupted of their own volition, but I had every intention of standing by their meaning.

Amir’s eyes darted from the dragon to me and back again. He stood in a lunge position, rocking from his left foot to his right. The three brothers seemed equally poised for action.

“What?” Amir said.

“Look at her.” I motioned toward the dragon. “She isn’t coming for us. She’s like the goblins. Watch.” I felt the heat of their collective

gaze as I stepped forward. No doubt they all thought me insane. I agreed. I'd never in my life been as brave and as stupid as I was right then. Nor would I be again, save for one other moment that would shape my future. A moment that lay on the other side of that dragon.

"Don't," Callum whispered, his voice urgent. I took another step. Then another. The dragon watched me with increasingly large eyes. I could sense the four princes waving as I moved forward, frantically calling me back as quietly as they could.

Amir grabbed hold of my arms, his breath hot against my neck. "What are you doing?" His concern gave his words a piercing edge, but they weren't sharp enough to cut through my resolve. I couldn't explain how I knew the dragon wouldn't hurt us unless we gave her reason, but I did. Just like I knew I could trust any message Red sent to us.

I shook out of Amir's grasp and surged forward. The dragon straightened, her spiked head scraping the ornate paintings across the ceiling. She opened her powerful jaws and let loose another burst of fire. The projected flames scorched the floor and wall, but did not come near us. When she closed her mouth again, I led Amir to rejoin the brothers.

"See?" I said. "She's not aggressive. Not unless we try to pass."

"But," Elias started, "we need to pass. The stairwell to the tower is behind her."

"Of course it is," Amir said. It was the first I'd seen of his signature sarcasm since I'd woken up. I felt grateful for that small measure of humour. After a few moments of contemplation, he

sighed and dropped his sword to the height of his hip. “Do you know any other way through?”

“There is no other way.” Sebastian spoke flatly, defeated.

“There is,” I said. “We help her remember.”

“Remember?” Callum sheathed his sword. Then, moving closer to me, he took my hand. “Are you saying—”

“Yes.” I used my free hand to cover his. “She must be part of your family. She’s trapped just like you were.”

“Callum, it must be mother!” Elias blurted. “It must be!” The hope glistening in his eyes nearly brought tears to mine, but I forced myself to remain stoic. I could process all of what was happening later. This wasn’t the time.

“Do you think so?” Sebastian said, his gaze returning to the dragon. “Such a beast could really be her?”

Callum bit his lower lip, his eyes hardening. He looked as though he’d aged in the few short hours since I’d met him. And why wouldn’t he have? The last he remembered, he was a young man surrounded by his family and his subjects, waiting for adulthood, waiting for marriage, waiting to be a man. It was all gone. His family and subjects were cursed. His betrothed was long dead. And manhood had been thrust upon him whether ready for it or not.

“We were goblins,” he said. “Whatever lunacy made that possible could also do this to our mother.”

“Talia,” Amir said, “Can you fix her? Like you did the princes?”

I turned on the spot to better consider the dragon. Her scales continued to glisten in the light, her spiny tail curled around one of her legs as she watched us with suspicion. I closed my eyelids so I could see her with my mind’s eye. Deep within me, I willed her

scales to melt. Her tail to wither. Her eyes to shrink. The vision of the dragon broke, cracked, and shattered until an intelligent-looking woman with green eyes and auburn hair stood in its place. Her cheeks were stained by dried tears, her hands drawn together as she begged me to help her.

The woman's familiar features left no doubt she was the Queen of Oldpass. Though she was more pale than her sons, they possessed the same facial structure. I reached out with my spirit, trying to grab hold of her, to pull her free of her prison. Something barred my way.

Gusts of hot and cold swished around me like a tornado. My spirit was lifted from the ground and flung into the wall. I'd never experienced such a thing. The shock forced me back into my body. I opened my eyes and gasped for air.

Amir had his arms around me tightly. "Shhh. Are you hurt?"

"No. No. I'm fine. But—" I pulled away from him and looked to the brothers. It felt like every time I spoke to them I had to chip away more small pieces of their hearts. "I'm sorry. I can't release her."

"Why not?" Elias's voice sounded more childlike than before. "You did it earlier!"

"The magic is too strong. There's some hope, though."

"What do you mean?" Sebastian said.

"She's still in there. She wants to be free, but she is so deep inside, I can't reach her. I think that, maybe...maybe you can."

All four of my companions frowned.

"What do you mean, Talia? You're the only one with the power to even see the worlds beyond ours, let alone the power to interact with them," Amir said.

“Surely, you trust me by now?”

His serious eyes softened. “You’re right,” he said. “I should know better after the last few weeks.”

“Could you two explain what’s going on?” Sebastian huffed. “If that dragon is my mother, I want her back.”

“Of course,” I replied. “She needs someone to remind her who she is. My incantations alone won’t be able to break through the curse. Not this time.”

“How do we do that?” Callum asked, more stoic than his younger brothers, who seemed agitated and impatient. “Just tell us what to do.”

I took a few steps back to increase the distance between myself and the watchful dragon. There was no need to risk antagonising her. She might have been another innocent trapped by dark magic, but just like the goblins, she would destroy us without a second thought. The brothers and Amir followed my lead.

“The three of you should hold hands,” I instructed. Without a word, the brothers formed a triangle. “It isn’t necessary, but closing your eyes may help you ignore the distraction of your mother’s form. You need to remember who she is. Her face. Her smell. Her voice. Anything at all.” I did my best to sound confident, capable.

The truth was, I had no idea if a memory bay would work. I’d never tried to reverse such a powerful spell before. Without a specific, tested technique in my arsenal, I returned to my early training. I thought of my first tutor, the woman who’d mentored and cared for me after my parents had left me indentured to Grimvein’s royal family. Not quite a prisoner, not quite free either. Nazli’s lessons had helped me find purpose in an unfamiliar world.

“You could learn every incantation and every spirit-trick known to humanity,” she’d told me, “But when you are the Caster of Grimvein, something will arise one day. You’ll find an adversary or a challenge unlike anything we could anticipate in these lessons.”

“How am I supposed to come out of something like that alive?” I’d asked her.

Nazli had stroked my cheek with the back her leathery fingers. “You *think*. That’s how. Remember three philosophies, child. First, no dark magic can hold back the force of love. Real, experienced love can break through anything. Second, with the exception of love, there is no such thing as unfaltering truth. Like history, truth is a construct, a distortion built of our own concepts and beliefs. Magic rearranges concepts, it challenges beliefs, it can reshape the way we view ourselves and everything around us. Sometimes for the better and sometimes not.”

“What’s the third thing?”

“That,” she’d said with wild eyes, “is not something I can ever teach you.”

By the gods, that woman had been frustrating! She’d taken the third philosophy with her to the grave a few years later. If there’d even been a third. Nazli never did teach me anything in a particularly direct fashion.

“Now what?” Elias’s frustrated voice returned me to the moment.

“Can I do anything to help?” Amir said, standing awkwardly next to the triangle of brothers. I shook my head, and his gaze dropped to the polished checkered floor. Inaction always frustrated him, but he had no role to play in that particular moment. He’d come there to slay a dragon. To be a noble hero and save a princess with the might

of his sword. Not to remain idle whilst others fought a battle he could not even see, let alone contribute to. The fact was, the story wasn't playing out the way either of us thought it would. For a start, we were still alive.

"Think about your mother," I told the boys. "Choose an image you have of her. No. Not just have. An image you can *feel*, that you can experience with all of your senses."

Their foreheads wrinkled as they concentrated. I waited until their breathing slowed, an indication they'd settled into the meditation of memory, before taking up a position between the twins. I covered their joined hands with my own, clasping their wrists. Neither of them reacted, a good indication they'd disconnected from the ballroom with their minds.

I felt Amir's attention on me as I breathed deeply and closed my eyes. I huffed as my projected self was abruptly dragged into another time and place. The boys had somehow managed to align their thoughts, to create a shared space. They'd all been drawn to the same moment in their past, pulling me into it with them. I allowed myself to hope the spirit-trick could actually work.

In their memories, the Queen of Oldpass sat sobbing in the centre of a dimly lit room on an oversized wooden chair covered in ornate carvings. She was completely alone. I could see the hopelessness she felt contracting and expanding in bright bursts of black smoke around her aura with every heaving sob.

"Mother!" The excited collective squeal of her four sons prompted the queen to wipe her face and straighten her spine before turning towards her children as they charged into the room. She forced a smile as the two youngest burst onto her lap, the older twins taking

up position on either side of the chair. Callum and Anton were near identical, but it was clear the ten-year-old on the left was Callum, his slender nose slightly hooked. His eyes were also more serious, more mature. Even back then, he'd considered himself the protector.

"What else can you remember?" I said. The young boys ignored me because, for them, I wasn't there. I couldn't see their older counterparts, the young men meditating in the ballroom mere metres away from a dragon, but I could feel their nostalgia and their melancholy. This was one of those childhood moments one reflects upon when older, realising their youthful innocence had coloured their understanding of the moment.

"Are you quite well, Mother?" the young Callum asked. I could smell his mother's perfume as though I were the one standing next to her, lavender with a hint of orange.

"Yes, darling boy," the queen replied, hugging the younger twins tighter. Elias and Sebastian remembered that hug as clearly as though it'd happened yesterday.

"You have to be happy today!" Elias grinned, looking up at her with a loving expression.

The queen smiled again, more genuinely than before. "Why is that, dear boy?"

"Because," Sebastian answered for him, "today is Aurora's birthday!"

Her smile dissolved, replaced by a deep sorrow the boys hadn't understood at the time, but did now. Their sister was one birthday closer to being taken by Tanit's curse. Every year, the queen had cried on her daughter's birthday, alone in that chair tucked away in a

shaded, dusty room left untouched every other day of the year. Except for this one occasion when her sons had found her.

How could Tanit do that to their family? The curse was only part of the torture. The rest was the waiting, a dense shadow hovering above all the years of Aurora's life. When her parents ought to have loved and embraced every moment of her childhood, they mourned them instead, for each passing day frightened them beyond measure. Even before her younger brothers knew why their parents felt such constant lamentation, they knew it was there, lurking in every hug, every kiss, every birthday.

"Talía. Please. Do something," Callum urged, his voice floating on a wave of despair. I'd almost become lost in the bittersweet beauty of their shared memory. I nodded, more to myself than anyone else, preparing for what came next.

I stretched my arms out as if to grab hold of the entire room the memory existed within. I curled my fingers around the edge of the image and lifted it as though it were a framed painting that hung on a wall. Is that not what all memories are? The people within it, the four young boys and their heartbroken mother, all froze in place.

"What are you doing?" Elias's voice wavered as he felt the shaking of his mind. Sebastian grimaced, but Callum's spirit remained silent.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I need to take this from you, just for a moment. Please don't fight me." I pulled at the image with all of my strength, but it wouldn't come away from their joined consciousness.

"I-I'm trying to let it go," Elias said.

"But I can't," Sebastian added. "We don't want to leave."

“Red,” I breathed. My core always felt warm when she touched me, whether physically or spiritually. Warm in the way the twins felt when their mother’s arms engulfed them. Totally safe and completely trusting. She struggled to stay connected, her presence flickering like a candle caught in a crosswind. As though throwing herself into the task, Red grasped my shoulders for the briefest of moments, and then she was gone. It was just long enough to energise my arms, allowing me to tear the frozen memory free from the boys.

In the ballroom, I released the hands of the young twins but kept my eyes closed so I wouldn’t disconnect from the space between worlds. I turned on the spot until I could see the essence of the dragon in front of me. After our inactivity, she’d curled up like a sleeping cat. The picture in my hands, imbued with the sounds, smells, and emotions of the three who’d conjured it, pulsed, alive and breathing.

*No spell can withstand true, experienced love.*

I hurled the picture at the stagnant dragon. The memory bay expanded into an enormous sheet and descended, engulfing her. It thinned and tightened until it became a second skin. The dragon’s long, spiky neck uncurled as she reared up. I opened my eyes.

“What did you do?” Amir yelled, trying to be heard over the dragon’s ghoulish wails. Something was happening to her, and unlike the moment the goblins had remembered who they truly were, it caused her pain.

“We reminded her who she is,” I replied, not blinking as I watched the dragon flap her wings in panic. Her flat head butted against the ceiling. She cried out and fell to the floor, sending shards of broken tiles about the space as her wings retreated into her body.

“Mother!” Callum raced past me.

Amir leapt forward and wrapped his arms around the young prince, keeping him out of harm’s way.

“Let go.” Callum struggled against Amir.

“I can’t,” he replied. “She could hurt you. Just stay back.”

Callum balled his hands into fists, the muscles in his forearms throbbing beneath the skin, but he stopped struggling and stood still. His brothers seemed equally frustrated that they could do nothing, but they stayed behind us.

The dragon’s skin started to melt away, revealing purplish, bloody flesh. We could see her bones shrinking and migrating underneath, the meaty tissue contracting, becoming smaller as its skeleton rearranged. The sight was far bloodier than the transformation of the goblins, the potency of the magic much stronger, and harder for the victim to endure.

The animistic wails gave way to humanlike shrieks, a woman’s voice breaking through. As the heap of bones and muscle took the shape of a person, new skin spread from the soles of her feet, gradually encasing her form. She fell to the floor, panting. I ran to cover her with my cloak as she shivered. The scent of burnt flesh wafted through the air around her.

“Your Majesty,” I soothed, tucking a thick curl of hair behind her ear. “You’re home. You’re safe.” I rubbed her back, and she started to cry. Her sons were upon us within seconds, and I withdrew, allowing them to embrace their mother. When she’d recovered, she would notice Anton’s absence, a moment I had no business being involved in.

Amir appeared beside me as I stood to full height. "Look." Nearby, a plain wooden door creaked open. "The princess," he said flatly.

"It must lead to the tower stairs," I replied. "Are you ready?"

He turned to look at me, his thoughtful eyes wide. "Talia—"

"Don't," I asserted. "Please."

"You need to know some things before we go up there."

I said nothing but nodded. I knew what he was about to say. I'd not hidden my feelings very well. No doubt he had sensed my affection, an affection I'd been trying my best to quieten since we found the entrance to the tunnel beneath Oldpass.

"You don't need to. I can deal with this," I told him, looking him directly in the eyes. Surprising to even myself, I meant it. I *could* cope with what was about to happen. Oldpass felt so familiar to me somehow. Being inside its ancient, fortified walls had helped to mitigate the intensity of my admiration. No, not mitigate it. Transform it.

"I don't want you to think that you're not wonderful," he said. "You are. I've admired you since I was an adolescent, when my parents first sought the right to employ you."

He'd noticed me back then? We'd seen one another during the years of my training, but never spoken. I'd had no idea he even knew my name all those years ago.

"That means something. Thank you," I replied.

"It's difficult to explain why I don't feel for you what I think other adults feel for one another sometimes."

I searched his worried face for more information, trying to understand what he meant.

“I...” He hesitated before continuing. “I love many people, but I’ve no desire to be intimate with any. I feel happy, I feel fulfilled, by my friendships, by the wonderful connections I share with others. Including you. I have no wish to be married to only one person, nor to engage in a physical romance with anyone. Do you understand?”

My stomach clenched for a moment, but as it released, a flood of relief swept through my limbs and torso. “Amir,” I said, taking hold of his hands excitedly. “I understand! You’re just like Nazli.” My voice sounded childlike as I remembered an almost identical discussion with my former tutor. “She had no desire for *physical* love either. Thank you. Thank you so much for being honest with me.” The hint of tears glistened in his eyes as I spoke. “I didn’t realise it until just now. You and I *are* special to one another, but not in the way the world expects men and women to be important to each other.”

He grinned. Brilliant white teeth contrasted the smooth, dark skin of his face as he leaned toward me, kissing my cheek. “That’s exactly right.”

My own smile dissipated as a chilling thought occurred to me. “But that leaves us with a considerable problem,” I said, looking toward the door behind him. “How do we wake up the princess?”

# Chapter Seven

THERE WAS NO mistaking the moment Briar Rose realised her son had died. There being no more we could do for them, Amir and I had left the queen with the princes so they might be alone.

The corridor beyond the ballroom led to a narrow staircase that curved upward in a clockwise direction. The steps were coarse and uneven, clearly not designed for visitors or officials, and so we made our way with care. Torches lined the staircase, and at a touch of my fingers, I lit each one as we passed, gaunt and twisted shadows splashing across the dirty walls.

The tower seemed like such a depressing and characterless space compared to the other areas we'd seen. Perhaps the north tower was a defensive position, designed as a kind of safe room should the castle come under attack.

As we passed an opening in the outer wall, we stopped to take in the cool, fresh air. Amir and I gazed at the city of Oldpass. It was the first time we'd seen anything beyond the castle itself, and it was beautiful.

Though about the same size as Grimvein, the architecture was entirely different. Paths were wider, some of them lined with magnificent jacaranda trees, others by squat, flat-topped homes. I rested my head against Amir's shoulder, and he wrapped his arm around me. It was the most comfortable I'd ever felt with him. Our

closeness was immutable. It was real, and it didn't need to be anything other than what it was.

I'd convinced myself that my attraction to him was romantic because of its intensity. Its purity. He—clearly wiser than I—knew that did not have to be the case, not at all. We breathed in unison as I took in the sad silence of Oldpass.

Then, Queen Briar screamed. Her despairing voice tore through me like infinite shards of glass, and I hugged Amir, searching for an escape from the raw and unrelenting truth of her pain. His heart thundered against my ear as we took some small measure of comfort in each other. Her scream tapered out, only to be replaced by desperate, visceral sobs echoing up the stone steps. Each one hit me square in the gut.

"We should keep moving."

"Yes," I replied, wiping away the tears that had travelled to my chin. "Perhaps we can at least return her daughter."

"And if we're lucky," he said as he turned to move up the stairs, "her husband as well."

"By the gods, yes. I almost forgot about the king. He could be anywhere in this city. Or *anything*."

"If we find Aurora...do you think the king might be open to negotiating an alliance with us? One that doesn't require a marriage?"

I sniffed back the last of my tears, determined to file them away for another time. "I'm sure he will. What reasonable person wouldn't?"

We fell into silence as we continued up the stairs. There was no more to say. No more we could do until we found Aurora. The

torches I lit provided very little heat, and it was getting colder as we climbed.

“Do you want my cloak?” Amir must’ve noticed my shivering.

“No,” I said, grateful but insistent. “We must be nearly there. Even if she magicked the tower to seem higher than it is, such a spell would unlikely be infinite.”

I’d always hated the curving staircases inside many royal buildings. Darkness did not scare me. It was the design. I always felt as if I were marching through an endless void, constantly moving but never getting anywhere. Yet, for once, that sensation did not come over me, despite the unnatural amount of time we’d been in motion. I didn’t feel lost or disoriented; I felt resolute, as though I knew where I was going and what I would do when I arrived. Though such a feeling made no sense, as I’d never been to Oldpass before, nor did I know what to do to break the curse. Though not impossible, it seemed unlikely Amir would be able to wake Aurora with the only known cure for such immense dark magic: true love. The kind of love expressed through touch. Through kiss.

We came to a small landing before a large, open space where there might have once been a door. What little I could see of the circular room beyond was unnaturally bright given the sun had started its lazy descent beyond the horizon.

Amir and I stood on the landing, considering each other. He smiled, and though I didn’t quite know why, I smiled back. We’d made it further—as far as we knew—than anyone else who’d sought out the sleeping princess. He’d told me things about himself I suspected he’d not told anyone before, and somehow, his trust and honesty had helped me realise I could love him in ways I hadn’t

considered. Ways that were sincere and affectionate, but not romantic. Amir had freed us both, and together, we'd achieved something incredible. Even if we failed in our final task, we'd at least freed the brothers and their mother. That was something. If it had to be, it could be everything.

"Who would've thought the two of us would actually get here?" I said at last.

"You doubted?" He grinned playfully.

I kicked at his shin gently. "I'm sure you did as well!"

He turned towards the chamber beyond the landing, his smile fading as he seemed to steel himself. "Let's see if she is in there." His hand firmly gripped the pommel of his sword, and he looked ready for a fight. I sensed his thirst for action might be denied yet again.

Without a word, I stepped past him and entered the room, Amir following behind. The capacious room was illuminated by an orb embedded in the ceiling, quite similar to my moonbeam stone but at least five times larger. Light spilled outward, luminous shards reaching for the simplistic bed in the centre of an otherwise empty space.

She was really there. The princess.

Aurora rested on her side, one hand pressed gently against her own cheek. Red hair spilled across her neck and shoulders, its flamboyant beauty made all the more magnificent by the contrast of a bland white nightgown. Her chest rose and fell, the sound of breathing rhythmic and robust. She was definitely alive, and so my own breathing quickened.

"I didn't really think she'd be here," I said, incredulous.

Amir exhaled loudly, as though he'd been holding his breath. "No," he whispered. "I don't think I did either." He moved to the end of the bed and looked down at her slender form pensively. "It's hard to believe this woman has been here, trapped for almost a century, in that exact position. She looks like she's taking a nap." He leaned forward and tilted his head to the side. "She's quite beautiful."

I walked around the opposite end of the bed, circling it so I could see her face from the other side. As she came into view, I fell to the wooden floor, my knees suddenly too weak to hold me. Time slowed as my ribs tightened against my heart.

Crimson hair. A narrow nose above generous lips and a soft chin. It couldn't be. *She...she...Aurora...the princess...* My thoughts were leaves caught in a hurricane. I couldn't grasp any of them.

"Talial!" Amir hoisted me off the floor and held me so tightly he probably would have cut off my air supply if I'd actually been breathing. "What is it?" He drew back and took my face in his hands. "Are you hurt? Is it the poison again?" I could hear his words, yet they made little sense.

My skin grew hot, fingertips starting to tingle. I curled my fingers and stabbed at my palms with my nails to force an inward breath. Sucking in the air, I refocused on Amir.

"It's her," I managed to say, continuing to breathe heavily.

Amir's eyes squinted, and his eyebrows slanted inward.

"It's Red."

He relaxed his face as he moved his hands to my side, holding me just enough to make sure I didn't fall again. "Your friend from the Other World?" He redirected his attention to Aurora's sleeping form. I

couldn't follow his gaze. What if I was wrong? What if it wasn't her? What if it *was* her? I didn't know which was more terrifying.

"I'm going to let go for a moment," Amir warned before moving towards the bed. He knelt, and I finally let myself look at the two of them. He reached out and brushed loose strands of Aurora's hair behind her ear. She didn't stir as her face came into full view.

"It's you," I murmured as I felt Red's projected hand slip into mine, keeping my eyes on Aurora.

Amir looked at me over his shoulder but said nothing.

"You're the princess."

"Yes," Red replied, her voice barely audible as she struggled to speak through tears. "I didn't know."

"All these years... This is exactly where we were meant to be," I replied. Her thumb drew circles on the back of my hand, sending soft sparks of electricity through me. Sparks I knew would be forgotten as soon as her spirit disappeared.

But not forever. Aurora was right in front of me. Real. Tangible. If I were to press my hand to Aurora's face, it wouldn't feel like a dream as it always did with Red. I'd be able to hold on to the memory of Aurora's warmth, rather than mourn its passing.

"Talia." Red pulled at my arm, encouraging me to face her. I closed my eyes as I turned, fear clamping down on my spine like a bear trap. After a few moments of thick silence, she spoke again. "It wasn't easy for me to get here. Tanit didn't want me to remember. Please. Please look at me."

I opened my eyes cautiously, blinking away tears that took me by surprise. She smiled at me with such compassion that I couldn't hold back the sob that erupted from me.

“Don’t be upset, my Talia,” she soothed, cupping my face with her hands. “You found me.”

“You made this happen, Red. Without you, I would never have ended up here.” It was astounding. Aurora, even though she might not have entirely understood why, had fashioned the making of her own salvation. It wasn’t Amir or me who had found a way to save Oldpass. It was her.

“We did it together,” she replied.

“What do I do? I don’t know how to send you home. To your body where you belong.” My heart raced faster under the scrutiny of her gaze. It pumped so hard I thought my sternum might snap. I’d searched those emerald eyes so many times before, but never with the possibility we could actually be...something.

“It’s so easy,” she said through her smile, her tears slowing. “Do you love me?”

I tried to swallow, but a hard lump had cemented itself inside my throat. Red swiftly moved her hands to my waist, pulling me towards her. I knew she was there in spirit only. Amir couldn’t see her, only the ways I reacted to her. I could feel her hands at that moment, but not her breath. There was no breath. There was no touch. Not really.

She softly dropped her forehead against my cheek as she whispered in my ear. “Do you love me?”

I couldn’t speak, so I nodded. The tears running down my face and the back of my throat wouldn’t let me speak. I’d *always* loved her, but I’d never dared hope anything could ever come of it.

“Then kiss me,” she said. “Wake me up.” Like a cold mist that settles over warm water, she disappeared. I touched my fingers to

my cheek, searching for some sign that she'd really been there. My skin was cold.

"Aurora guided us here," Amir said, still kneeling next to the antiquated bed. I pressed my hands to my stomach and willed my nerves to stop scrambling my insides. When I'd calmed somewhat, I moved to the bed and sat gently on the mattress.

"Yes," I told Amir. "She hasn't been lying here helpless for a century." I wiped away one last tear as I realised how proud of her I felt. "This...magnificent princess has been weaving together the threads that would see Tanit's evil destroyed. She must have been astral projecting for so long she completely forgot who she was, though she still somehow knew what she needed to do."

"I know I can't see her, but I don't think she only came to you when you needed the help that would lead you here."

"No," I replied, finally able to swallow. I slid my fingers along the length of her forearm and interlaced my fingers with hers. Though she didn't move, I could feel the life pulsating through her body. Beautiful and magical life. "It became so much more."

Amir rose and took a few steps away. I shuffled up the bed and looked down at Red. No. Not Red. Red was a spirit, a reflection of the woman lying on the bed before me. I searched Aurora's face. It felt wrong to kiss a person who slumbered, yet she'd invited me, and so I hoped what I was about to do could be forgiven.

Keeping one hand atop of hers, I lifted the other to her face and stroked the side of her neck, her skin soft and inviting. Leaning down, I let my gaze hover just above her. Her breath caressed my cheek in warm, gentle waves that brought a smile to my face. I

leaned closer still, my lips brushing hers for a brief moment. *Goddess. Please let this be the right thing to do.*

I kissed her. It was gentle and brief, as I did not wish to linger. Not, at least, until she could permit me to do so. I pulled away, scared to open my eyes. What if it didn't work? Nazli had said nothing could stand up against the power of real, experienced love. It was the only unfaltering truth in the universe. I couldn't help but fear that what I felt for Aurora wasn't the kind of love she'd spoken of. Or, if it was, perhaps it was necessary for the princess to return my feelings. Did she? I hoped so. I thought so. But I wasn't sure.

Then a soft hand caressed the top of my knee. "Talía," she whispered, her voice hoarse. My eyes flew open. Aurora sat upright, her head tilted as she rested on one arm, the other moving from my knee to my neck. I grabbed hold of her hand and pressed it tighter against my neck. She was real. She wasn't a dream or a spirit or some sort of illusion. She was there. With me.

I don't know if the sound that burst from my mouth was a laugh or a sob. Perhaps it was both. She smiled at me, as she had so many times before, but this time, she pulled me to her and pressed her lips against mine in a kiss that made me forget every other kiss I'd experienced in my life. Tucking both my legs beneath me, I wrapped one arm around her shoulders, the other reaching for her hair, my fingers becoming lost in its silken threads.

"Ahem," Amir coughed. I laughed and turned to look at him. "Seems you managed to break the spell." He dropped his hand from the pommel of his sword as he grinned.

"Of course, she did," Aurora said, her face still so close to mine I could feel the heat of her skin. "She was always going to. I just had

to wait a while.”

My smile was so wide, I thought it might touch my ears. Every single event in my life had led me there, to that chamber. To her. I was grateful for all of it.

I held both sides of her face and kissed her again, her lips, her arms, her body, all of it awakening me as if it had been I who'd slept for the last hundred years. When I pulled away, I yelled for a moment, startled that Amir had appeared directly next to us. I hadn't heard him move. I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow.

“Hey!” he protested. “I didn't want you two forgetting I was here. That could become...awkward.”

Aurora huffed at him cheerfully. “You're taller than you looked when I was projecting.”

“Well, I can't comment likewise, I'm afraid,” he replied with a boyish smirk. “Whenever Talia spoke to you, she just seemed like something of a lunatic, mumbling to herself and shoving herself about the place.”

From somewhere outside, a loud trumpet sounded throughout Oldpass.

They were waking up!

“It's working,” Aurora said. “That's the call for a gathering in the square. My father must be out there somewhere, only he can give the command to assemble. My family! We must go find them.”

My heart grew heavy as I remembered what had happened to Anton. “Aurora, I-I wish I didn't have to tell you this.”

Her face grew ashen, her eyes hardening. “What is it? What's wrong?”

“Anton. He...”

“I’m sorry,” Amir said, saving me from my inability to speak. As gently as he could, he explained what’d happened in the castle courtyard. Aurora’s eyes glistened, until, finally, she cried out, covering her mouth with her hands. I engulfed her with my arms, holding her. She needed to know I was there. That I would support her. Love her. Whatever I could do.

“Wait,” she snapped back, suddenly calm. “Talia. We can help him.”

“What do you mean? He’s gone. I don’t know what we could do. It’s impossible to bring people back from the dead.”

“Only because there would never be enough power to drive such a spell.” She spoke quickly, and I had to concentrate to understand her words.

“What did Nazli tell you? Remember! There are three key philosophies.”

“Well, so she said. I never did find out the third.”

“But you have! You’ve always known the third. How do you cast your spells?”

“It’s difficult to explain. I suppose, at their heart, all spells are energy transferred. Taken from one place, often somewhere unseen, and moved somewhere else.” My mouth fell open as I realised what she meant. “Tanit’s curse! The power behind it isn’t gone. Only displaced. It’s still here, stuck to the web!” I jumped to my feet. We could fix this.

“If we can harness the residual power, draw it to us—”

“And redirect it, we can call Anton back through the veil—”

“And return him to his body!”

Amir clapped his hands together and drew his fingertips to his lips. "Is this possible? Can you bring him back? I would do anything to see my mistake undone."

"The third philosophy—" Aurora started as she looked at me.

"Is that anything is possible," I said. "Because no truth—" I took Aurora's hand in mine and brought it to my lips, kissing her palm softly. "—is unfaltering. Not even the truth of death."

"No truth, that is," Aurora said, dropping her head to rest on my shoulder, "but love."

## About the Author

Rebecca Langham lives in the Blue Mountains (Australia) with her partner, three children, and menagerie of pets. A Xenite, a Whovian and all-round general nerd, she's a lover of science fiction, comic books, and caffeine. When she isn't teaching History to high schoolers or wrangling children, Rebecca enjoys playing broomball and reading.

Email: [info@rebeccalangham.com.au](mailto:info@rebeccalangham.com.au)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/RLanghamAuthor](http://www.facebook.com/RLanghamAuthor)

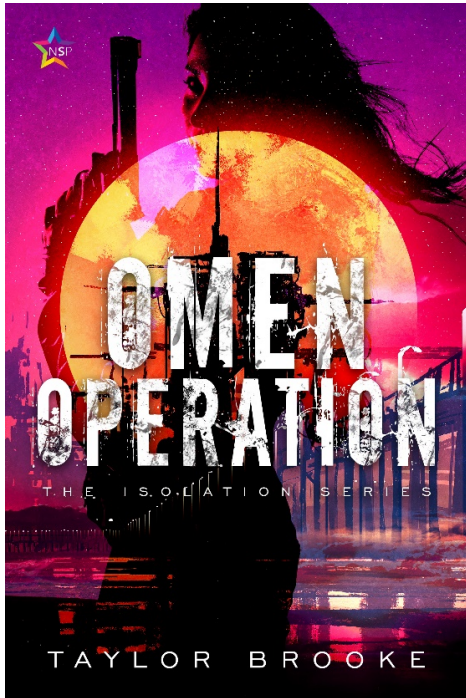
Twitter: [@rlangham85](https://twitter.com/rlangham85)

Website: [www.rebeccalangham.com.au](http://www.rebeccalangham.com.au)

## Other books by this author

*Beneath the Surface*

Also Available from NineStar Press



Connect with NineStar Press

Website: [NineStarPress.com](http://NineStarPress.com)

Facebook: [NineStarPress](https://www.facebook.com/NineStarPress)

Facebook Reader Group: [NineStarNiche](https://www.facebook.com/groups/NineStarNiche)

Twitter: [@ninestarpress](https://twitter.com/ninestarpress)

Tumblr: [NineStarPress](http://NineStarPress.tumblr.com)